

The Ballad of Liberation from the Khandhas

by
Phra Ajaan Mun Bhuridatta Mahathera

Translated from the Thai by
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Introduction

Phra Ajaan Mun Bhuridatta Mahathera (1870-1949) was by all accounts the most highly respected Buddhist monk in recent Thai history. Ordained in 1893, he spent the major part of his life wandering through Thailand, Burma, and Laos, dwelling for the most part in the forest, engaged in the practice of meditation. He attracted a large following of students and -- together with his teacher, Phra Ajaan Sao Kantasila Mahathera -- was responsible for the establishment of the forest ascetic tradition that has now spread throughout Thailand and to several countries abroad.

Despite his fame as a teacher, very few of his teachings were recorded for posterity. Only one slim book of passages drawn from his sermons, *Muttodaya* (A Heart Released), was published during his lifetime. His students generally believed that he himself never wrote down any of his teachings, but at his death the following poem was found among the few papers he left behind. As he noted on the final page, he composed it during one of his brief stays in Bangkok, at Wat Srapatum (LotusPond Monastery), probably in the early 1930's. He was apparently inspired by an anonymous poem on the theme of meditation composed and printed in Bangkok during that period, for both poems share virtually the same beginning -- the 39 lines in the following translation beginning with, "Once there was a man who loved himself..." Ajaan Mun's poem, however, then develops in an entirely original direction and shows by far a deeper understanding of the training of the mind.

Translating the poem has presented a number of difficulties, not the least of which has been getting a definitive reading of the original manuscript. Ajaan Mun wrote during the days before Thai spelling became standardized, some of the passages were smudged with age, and a few seem to have been "corrected" by a later hand. Another difficulty has been

the more general problem of finding the proper English style for translating Thai poetry, which depends heavily on rhyme, rhythm, and a stripped-down syntax, somewhat like that of telegrams and newspaper headlines. This style gives Thai poetry a lightness of style combined with a richness of meaning, but frustrates any attempt to pin down any one precise message for the sake of translation -- an excellent lesson for anyone who feels that the truth is what is conveyed in words.

The following translation is meant to be as literal as possible, although I have fleshed the text out when it seemed necessary to make the English intelligible. Because the original alternates between two poetic forms -- *klon* and *rai* -- I tried to create a similar effect in English by alternating blank verse and free verse. The result is probably too literal to be poetry, but I felt that anyone reading it would be more interested in the meaning than in verbal effects. The instances where I have taken the most liberty with the text have been included in square brackets, as has one passage -- ironically, dealing with the error of being addicted to correcting things -- where the reading of the original seems to have been doctored.

The reader will notice that in a few places the poem seems to jump abruptly from one topic to another. In some cases these shifts were dictated by the rhyme scheme, but in others they are not really shifts at all. Keep in mind that the poem operates on several levels. In particular, two parallel themes run throughout: (1) an analysis of the external error of focusing on the faults of other people instead of one's own, and (2) a discussion of the mind's internal error of viewing (and criticizing) the khandhas as somehow separate from its own efforts to know them. Statements made directly about one level apply indirectly to the other as well. Thus the poem covers a wider range of the practice than might appear at first glance. It's a work that rewards repeated readings.

I would like to express my gratitude to Phra Ajaan Suwat Suvaco (Phra Bodhidhammacariya Thera) for the invaluable help he gave me in untangling some of the knottier passages in the poem. Any mistakes that may remain, of course, are mine.

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Glossary

Dhamma: In general, this word has several levels of meaning: the way things are in and of themselves, the Buddha's teachings about the way things are, the practice of those teachings in training the mind, and the attainment of Deathlessness as the goal of the practice. In this ballad, 'Dhamma' usually has the final meaning. The nine transcendent

Dhammas are the paths and fruitions of each of the four stages of Awakening -- stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship -- plus *nibbana* (*nirvana*).

Jhana: Concentration; meditative absorption in a physical sensation or a mental notion.

Kamma: Intentional acts that lead to renewed states of becoming and birth.

Khandha: Component parts of sensory perception: *rupa* (physical phenomena); *vedana* (feelings of pleasure, pain, or indifference); *sañña* (concepts, labels, allusions); *sankhara* (mental fashionings, formations, processes); and *viññana* (sensory consciousness).

The Ballad of Liberation from the Khandhas

Namatthu sugatassa Pañca dhamma-khandhani

I pay homage to the one Well-gone,
the Foremost Teacher, the Sakyan Sage,
the Rightly Self-Awakened One;
& to the nine transcendent Dhammas;
& to the Noble Sangha.

I will now give a brief exposition
of the Dhamma khandhas,
as far as I understand them.

Once there was a man who loved himself
and feared distress. He wanted happiness
beyond the reach of danger, so he wandered
endlessly. Wherever people said
that happiness was found, he longed to go,
but wandering took a long, long time.
He was the sort of man who loved himself
and really dreaded death. He truly wanted
release from aging & mortality.
Then one day he came to know the truth,
abandoning the cause of suffering &
compounded things. He found a cave of wonders,
of endless happiness, i.e., the body.

As he gazed throughout the cave of wonders,
his suffering was destroyed, his fears appeased.

He gazed and gazed around the mountain side,
Experiencing unbounded peace.

He feared if he were to go and tell his friends,
they'd say he'd gone insane. He'd better stay
alone, engaged in peace, abandoning
his thoughts of contact, than to roam around,
a sycophant, both criticized & flattered,
exasperated & annoyed.

But then there was another man afraid
of death, his heart all withered & discouraged.
He came to me and spoke frankly
in a pitiful way. He said,
"You've made an effort at your meditation
for a long time now.
Have you seen it yet,
the true Dhamma of your dreams?"
(Eh! How is it that he knows my mind?)
He asked to stay with me, so I agreed.
"I'll take you to a massive mountain
with a cave of wonders
free from suffering & stress:
 mindfulness immersed in the body.
You can view it at your leisure to cool your heart
and end your troubles.
This is the path of the Noble lineage.
It's up to you to go or not.

I'm not deceiving or compelling you,
just telling you the truth for what it is."
And then I challenged him with riddles. First:

"What runs?"

"What runs quickly is viññana,
movements walking in a row,
one after another. Not doubting that saññas are right,
the heart gets caught up in the running back & forth.
Saññas grab hold of things outside
and pull them in to fool the mind,
Making it think in confusion & go out searching,
wandering astray.
They fool it with various dhammas,
like a mirage."

"What gains total release from the five khandhas?"

"The heart, of course, & the heart alone.
It doesn't grasp or get entangled.
No more poison of possessiveness,
no more delusion,
it stands alone.
No saññas can fool it into following along
behind them."

"When they say there's death, what dies?"

"Sankharas die, destroying their effects."

"What connects the mind into the cycle?"

"The tricks of sañña make it spin.
The mind goes wrong because it trusts its saññas,
attached to its likes,
leaving this plane of being,
going to that, wandering till it's dizzy,
forgetting itself,
completely obscure to itself.
No matter how hard it tries to find the Dhamma,
it can't catch a glimpse."

"What ferrets out the Dhamma?"

"The heart ferrets it out,
trying to find out how saññas say 'good'
and grasp at 'bad'
and force it to fasten on loving & hating."

"To eat once & never look for more?"

"The end of wanting to look, to know,
to hope for knowing more,
The end of entanglements.
The mind sits still on its dais,
discarding its attachments."

"A four-sided pool, brimming full?"

"The end of desire, abandoning doubt,
clean, without a mote, & danger-free.
Saññas settle out, sankharas don't disturb it."

The heart is thus brimming, with nothing lacking.
Quiet & still, the mind
has no lamenting thoughts:
something worth admiring day after day.
Even if one were to gain
heavenly treasures by the millions,
they'd be no match for the true knowing
that abandons all sankharas.

The crucial thing: the ending of desire.
Labels stay in their own sphere and don't intrude.
The mind, unenthralled with anything,
stops its struggling.
Like taking a mirror to look at your reflection:
Don't get attached to the saññas,
which are like the image.
Don't get intoxicated with the issues of sankharas.

"When the heart moves, you can catch sight
of the unadulterated heart.
You know for sure that the movement is in yourself
because it changes.
Inconstancy is a feature of the heart itself,
no need to criticize anyone else.
You know the different sorts of khandhas
in the moving of the mind.

"Before, I used to think that saññas were the heart,
labeling 'outer' & 'inner,'
which was why I was fooled.
Now the heart's in charge, with no concerns,
no hopes of relying on any one sañña at all.
Whatever arises or passes away
there's no need to be possessive of saññas
or to try to prevent them."

*"Like climbing to the top of a truly tall mountain
and looking at the lowlands below,
seeing every living being."*

"Way up high, looking back
you see all your affairs
from the very beginning,
forming a path, like stairs."

*"Does the rise & fall of the river
accord with the Truth?"*

"You can't remedy the changing of sankharas.
Fashioned by kamma,
they're out to spite no one.
If you grasp hold of them
to push them this way & that,
the mind has to become defiled & wrong.
Don't think of resisting
the natural way of all things.
Let good & evil follow their own affairs.
 We simply free
 ourselves.
Unentangled in sankharas:
That's what's peaceful & cool.
When you know the truth,
you have to let go of sankharas
as soon as you see their changing.
When you weary of them,
you let them go easily,
with no need to be forced.
 The Dhamma is cooling.
 The mind will stop
 being subjected to things."

"The five duties complete?"

"Khandhas divide the issues of fashioning
into five realms,
each filled with its duties & affairs,
with no room for any other,
because their hands are full --
no room even for fortune, status, praise, pleasure,
loss of fortune, loss of status, criticism, pain.
They let each of these follow its own nature,
in line with its truth.
The mind's not entangled
with any of these eight,
because physical khandhas keep creating
aging & illness without pause.
The mental khandhas never rest.
They work like motors
because they must take on the kamma
of what they have done:
Good things make them enthralled & happy,
bad things agitate and darken the heart,
making it think without stop,
as if it were aflame.

The mind is defiled & dull.
Its loves & hates
are things it has thought up on its own,
so who else can it blame?

"Do you want to escape aging & death?
It's beyond the range of possibility,
as when we want the mind to stop
wandering around and thinking,
when we want it to stay at one
and hope to depend on its stillness.
The mind is something that changes,
totally uncertain.
Saññas stay in place only from time to time.
Once we grow wise to the nature
of all five khandhas,
the mind will be clear & clean,
free from stain, with no more issues.
If you can know in this way,
it's superlative,
because you see the truth,
withdraw,
and gain release.
That's the end of the path.
You don't resist the natural way
of the truth of things.
Poverty & wealth, good & bad,
in line with events both within & without,
all have to pass and vanish.
You can't grasp hold of anything
at which the mind takes aim.

"Now, when the mind's inconstant on its own
-- aquiver, quick -- and you catch sight of it,
that's when you find the ultimate in ease.
Small things obscure our knowledge of the large.
The khandhas totally obscure the Dhamma,
and that's where we go wrong. We waste our time
in watching khandhas so that we don't see
the Dhamma that, though greater than the khandhas,
seems like dust."

"There is, there isn't. There isn't, yet there is."

"Here I'm totally stymied
and can't figure it out.
Please explain what it means."

"There is birth of various causes & effects,
but they are not beings,
they all pass away.

 This is clear,
the meaning of the first point:
There is, there isn't.
The second point, there isn't, yet there is:
This refers to the deep Dhamma,
the end of all three levels of existence,
where there are no sankharas,
and yet there is the stable Dhamma.
This is the Singular Dhamma, truly solitary.
The Dhamma is One & unchanging.
excelling all being, extremely still.
The object of the unmoving heart,
 still & at respite,
 quiet & clear.
No longer intoxicated,
no longer feverish,
its desires all uprooted,
its uncertainties shed,
its entanglement with the khandhas
all ended & appeased,
the gears of the three levels of the cosmos all broken,
overweening desire thrown away,
its loves brought to an end,
with no more possessiveness,
all troubles cured
as the heart had aspired."

 "Please explain the mind's path
 in yet another way,
 & the cause of suffering in the mind
 that obscures the Dhamma."

"The cause is enormous,
but to put it briefly,
 it's the love
 that puts a squeeze on the heart,
making it concerned for the khandhas.
If the Dhamma is with the heart
throughout time,

that's the end of attachment,
with no more cause for suffering:
 Remember this, it's the path of the mind.

You won't have to wonder,
spinning around till you're dizzy.
The mind, when the Dhamma's not always with it,
gets attached to its likes,
concerned for the khandhas,
sunk in the cause of suffering.

"So in brief, there's suffering
& there's the Dhamma
always with the mind.
Contemplate this until you see the truth,
and the mind will be completely cool.
However great the pleasure or pain,
 they'll cause you no fear.
No longer drunk with the cause of suffering,
the mind's well-gone.
Knowing just this much is enough
 to soothe your fevers,
and to rest from your search for a path to release.
The mind knowing the Dhamma forgets
the mind attached to dust.
The heart knowing the Dhamma of ultimate ease
sees for sure that the khandhas are always stressful.
The Dhamma stays as the Dhamma,
the khandhas stay as khandhas, that's all.

"And as for the phrase,
'Cool, at ease, & freed from fever,'
this refers to the mind that's rescued itself
from the addictive error
[of correcting other things].

The sankhara aggregate offers no pleasure
and truly is painful,
for it has to age, grow ill, and die every day.
When the mind knows the unexcelled Dhamma,
it extracts itself from its defiling error
that aggravates disease.
This error is a fierce fault of the mind.
But when it clearly sees the Dhamma,
 it removes its error,
and there's no more poison in the heart.

When the mind sees the Dhamma,
abundantly good
& released from error,
meeting the Dhamma, it sheds all things
that would make it restless.
It's mindful, in & of itself,
& unentangled.
Its love for the khandhas comes to an end,
its likes are cured,
its worries cease,
all dust is gone.
Even if the mind thinks in line with its nature,
we don't try to stop it.
And when we don't stop it,
it stops running wild.
This frees us from turmoil.

*"Know that evil comes
from resisting the truth.*

"Evil comes from not knowing.
If we can close the door on stupidity,
there's ultimate ease.
All evil grows silent, perfectly still.
All the khandhas are suffering, with no pleasure at all.

"Before I was stupid & in the dark,
as if I were in a cave.
In my desire to see the Dhamma,
I tried to grab hold of the heart to still it.
I grabbed hold of mental labels,
thinking they were the heart
until it became a habit.
Doing this I was long enthralled
with watching them.
Wrong mental labels obscured the mind
and I was deluded into playing around
with the khandhas --
Poor me!

"Exalting myself endlessly,
I went around passing judgment on others
but accomplishing nothing.
Looking at the faults of others
embitters the heart,
as if we were to set ourselves on fire,

becoming sooty & burned.
Whoever's right or wrong, good or bad,
that's their business.
Ours is to make sure
the heart looks after itself.
Don't let unskillful attitudes buzz around it & land.
Make it consummate
in merit & skill --
the result will be peace.
Seeing others as bad and oneself as good
is a stain on the heart,
for one latches onto the khandha
that holds to that judgment.
If you latch onto the khandhas
they'll burn you for sure,
for aging, defilement, & death will join in the fray:
full of anger & love, obvious faults,
worries, sorrows, & fears,
while the five forms of sensuality
bring in their multifarious troops.
We gain no release from suffering & danger
because we hold to the five khandhas as ours.
Once you see your error, don't delay.
Keep constant watch on the inconstancy of sankharas.
When the mind gets used to this,
you're sure to see the Singular Dhamma,
solitary in the mind.

"Inconstancy' refers to the heart
as it moves from its labels.
When you see this, watch it
again & again,
right at the moving.
When all external objects have faded away,
the Dhamma will appear.

When you see that Dhamma, you recover
from mental unrest.
The mind then won't be attached to dualities.
Just this much truth can end the game.
Knowing not-knowing:
That's the method for the heart.
Once we see through inconstancy,
the mind-source stops creating issues.
All that remains is the primal mind,
true & unchanging.

Knowing the mind-source
brings release from all worry & error.
If you go out to the mind-ends,
you're immediately wrong.

"Darkness' comes from the mind
possessive of what's good.
This possessiveness is thought up
by the mind-ends.
The mind-source is already good
when the Dhamma appears, erasing doubt.
When you see the superlative Dhamma,
surpassing the world,
all your old confused searchings
are uprooted and let go.
The [only] suffering left
is the need to sleep and eat
in line with events.
The heart stays, tamed, near the mind-source,
Thinking, yet not dwelling on its thoughts.

The nature of the mind is that it has to think,
But when it senses the mind-source
it's released from its sorrows,
secluded from disturbances, & still.
The nature of sankharas
when they appear
is to vanish.
They all decay; none remain.

Beware of the mind
when you focus on making it refined,
for you'll tend to force it
to get stuck on the stillness.
Get the heart to look again & again
at its inconstancy, until it's a habit.
When you reach 'Oh!'
it will come on its own:
 awareness of the heart's song,
 like a mirage.
The Buddha says the corruptions of insight
disguise themselves as true
when actually they're not.
The awareness of mental phenomena
that comes on its own,
 is direct vision,

not like hearing & understanding
on the level of questioning.
The analysis of phenomena,
mental & physical,
is also not vision that comes on its own:
so look.

The awareness that comes on its own
is not the thought-song.
Knowing the mind-source
& mind-moments,
the source-mind is released from sorrow.
The mind-source's certain
automatic knowledge of sankharas
-- the affairs of change --
is not a matter of parading out
to see or know a thing.
It's also not a knowledge based
on labeling in pairs.
The mind knows itself
from the motion of the song.
The mind's knowledge of the motion
is simply adjacent mind-moments.
In fact, they can't be divided:
They're all one & the same.
When the mind is two, that's called
sañña entangling things.
Inconstancy is itself, so why focus on anyone else?

"When the heart sees its own decayings,
it's released from darkness.
It loses its taste for them,
and abandons its doubts.
It stops searching for things within & without.
Its attachments all fall away.
It leaves its loves & hates,
whatever weighs it down.
It can end its desires,
its sorrows all vanish --
together with the weighty cares
that made it moan --
as if a shower of rain were to refresh the heart.
The cool heart is realized by the heart itself.
The heart is cool for it has no need
to wander around, looking at people.
Knowing the mind-source in the present,

it's unshakeable & unconcerned
with any good or evil,
for they must pass away,
with all other impediments.
Perfectly still, the mind-source
neither thinks nor interprets.
It stays only with its own affairs:
 no expectations,
 no need to be entangled or troubled,
 no need to keep up its guard.
Sitting or lying down, one thinks
at the source-mind: 'Released.'"

 "Your explanation of the path
 is penetrating,
 so encompassing & clear.
 Just one more thing:
 Please explain in detail the mind
 unreleased from the cause of suffering."

"The cause of suffering is attachment & love,
extremely enthralled,
creating new states of being
without wearying.
On the lower level, the stains
are the five strings of sensuality;
on the higher level,
attachment to jhana.
In terms of how these things
 act in the mind:
It's all an affair of being enthralled with sankharas,
enthralled with all that have happened
for a long, long time --
 seeing them as good,
 nourishing the heart on error,
 making it branch out
 in restlessness distraction.
Smitten by error, with no sense of shame,
enthralled with admiring
whatever it fancies --
enthralled to the point where it forgets itself
and loses its sense of danger;
enthralled with viewing the faults of others,
upset by their evil,
not seeing its own faults as anything at all.
No matter how great the faults of others,

they can't make us fall into hell.
While our own faults can take us
to the severest hell straightaway,
even if they aren't very defiling at all.
So keep watch on your faults
until it comes naturally.
Avoid those faults
and you're sure to see
 happiness free
 from danger & fear.
When you see your faults clearly
cut them right away.
Don't dawdle or delay
or you'll never be rid of them.

"Wanting what's good, without stop:
That's the cause of suffering.
It's a great fault: the strong fear of bad.
'Good' & 'bad' are poisons to the mind,
like foods that enflame a high fever.
The Dhamma isn't clear
because of our basic desire for good.
Desire for good, when it's great,
drags the mind into turbulent thought
until the mind gets inflated with evil,
and all its defilements proliferate.
The greater the error, the more they flourish,
taking one further & further away
from the genuine Dhamma."

"This way of explaining
the cause of suffering
chastens my heart.
[At first] the meaning
was tattered & tangled,
but when you explained the path
my heart didn't move:
at respite, still, & at peace,
reaching an end at last."

"This is called the attainment
of liberation from the khandhas,
a Dhamma that remains in place,
with no coming or going,
a genuine nature -- the only one --
with nothing to make it stray or spin."

With that, the tale is ended. Right or wrong,
please ponder with discernment till you know.

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<http://www.accesstosight.org/lib/thai/mun/ballad.html>